Specter defends suspended student

High school senior punished for questions about JFK assassination

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WILKES-BARRE, Pa. — A high school senior was suspended for five days for blurting out questions about the Kennedy assassination to Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., during an assembly.

Specter has come to Mario Romanelli's defense, urging Wilkes-Barre Area School District Superintendent Jeff Namey to go easy on the 18-year-old.

"A certain amount of skepticism is a very healthy thing in America. I thought he was well within the appropriate bounds," Specter wrote in a letter to Namey.

Romanelli said he was punished because he questioned Specter about his role in the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President Kennedy.

But Namey said Romanelli was disciplined because he blurted out questions without raising his hand while Specter was making his opening remarks.

"It's not an issue of freedom of speech; it's an issue of how he handled himself," Namey said. "The senator did not take offense, and for that, I'm happy. But it was offensive, and it was inappropriate."

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>
> **Sen. Arlen Specter**

At Thursday's assembly at Coughlin High School, Romanelli had asked Specter about the so-called "magic bullet" theory.

In 1964, as a staff lawyer for the Warren Commission, Specter spearheaded a controversial theory that a single bullet hit both Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally.

His work led the commission to conclude that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin.

Romanelli is a history buff who believes there is a conspiracy behind Kennedy's assassination. The teen-ager "handled himself entirely properly," according to Specter.

"Beyond Mr. Romanelli, I think it would have a decisive, chilling effect on other students who seek to ask questions under similar circumstances," Specter wrote. "In America, we want to encourage this kind of exchange, not discourage it through the possibility of a suspension."

Namey said he and Coughlin Principal William Schwab discussed Specter's letter but did not change Romanelli's suspension, which began Friday. Namey said the lengthy suspension "is an accumulation of events," but he would not discuss Romanelli's record. Romanelli can return to school on Friday.

Romanelli said that he couldn't believe that Pennsylvania's senior senator had come to his defense.

"That's amazing," he said. "I didn't think he would be [on my side] but, wow."

AP file/JOEL RENNICH

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., said a high school senior who questioned him "handled himself entirely properly."